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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001115

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: LONGSTANDING ACTIVIST'S VIEW ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS  
SITUATION IN ALGERIA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton;  
reasons 1.4 (b, d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: A societal respect for human rights is lacking in Algeria, according to prominent human rights activist and lawyer Ali Yahia Abdenour. Looking back over decades of his work, he commented that while some progress has been made in comparison to the low point of the 1990s, significant change will only come when a new generation of political leadership emerges. He highlighted press freedom and the right of association as the most urgent issues now. END SUMMARY.

#### CHALLENGES TO HUMAN RIGHTS IN ALGERIA

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12. (C) Prominent Algerian human rights defender Ali Yahia Abdenour, president emeritus of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH), told the Ambassador August 4 that Algeria did not have a society-wide culture of respect of human rights. The country, he said, was divided into "tribes," with individuals more interested in their group or people from their region. Abdenour articulated two key impediments to the promotion of human rights in Algeria. First, the State of Emergency in force since 1992 was used to prevent individuals from meeting freely and from demonstrating publicly and, as a result, was preventing Algeria's natural evolution towards a greater respect for human rights. Second, Algeria's political leadership was aged, had come from or been selected by the military and, as a result, restrictive. He also derided the country's presidents for their lack of formal education.

13. (C) Abdenour supported a dualistic approach to defending human rights in Algeria: one public, including clear campaigns to defend the principles of human rights; the other working directly with various power groups within the GOA to effect change on specific cases. Abdenour said it was possible to secure improvements on individual cases -- better treatment of prisoners or their release, for example -- but he insisted that public pressure for better GOA policy overall was also vital.

#### ONGOING HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES IN ALGERIA

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14. (C) Abdenour acknowledged the relative freedom of Algerian newspapers to criticize President Bouteflika, to report on sensitive issues and to publish biting political cartoons. He cautioned, however, that each newspaper had its own political leanings, with some linked to special interest groups to include the army and the security services. Criticism of the president in some newspapers, he claimed, had the support of the military in its competition with

Bouteflika and other GOA officials. The president or other officials use the defamation laws to intimidate the press, he added. The Ambassador pointed to the DVC the Embassy organized in May about decriminalizing defamation. The Ambassador also pointed to his public remarks in the Arabic-language daily El-Khabar in June criticizing the existing defamation laws and urging that defamation be treated as a civil, not criminal, offense. Abdenour praised the public statements and recommended the we continue our efforts on defamation.

¶5. (C) Abdenour also told the Ambassador that torture in Algeria by the security services had diminished significantly in comparison to the past. He asserted that President Bouteflika and military intelligence chief Lt. General Mediene had both issued instructions forbidding torture in interrogations. There were still abuses, he noted, but they were problems with individual officers rather than systemic problems.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador asked Abdenour where U.S. pressure could be most useful. Abdenour said beyond the press defamation issue, the most important problem to address was freedom of association. The GOA, he stated, blocks meetings and seminars that opposition parties and independent NGOs try to organize. It uses authorities under the State of Emergency to refuse permission for such events. He recommended the U.S. press for the termination of the State of Emergency so that Algerian civil society could be more active and independent.

TROUBLE WITHIN THE LEAGUE

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¶7. (C) Abdenour alluded to the widely discussed tension within the LADDH, describing the current leader, Hocine Zehouane, as isolated and intellectually stuck. (Note: Much of the tension stems from divergent views on the future direction of the organization. We met Zehouane July 31, but he made no mention of ongoing organizational turmoil. End note.)

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Ali Abdenour has been a thorn in the side of the government for 15 years. Under his very prominent leadership in the 1990s, the LADDH was the most outspoken organization criticizing the then-military government's detentions, summary executions and torture, its pressure on the press, as well as its Legislative Decree 92-03 on subversion and terrorism. Abdenour, who is now over 80, is pushing the current LADDH leadership to be more aggressive. For its part, the GOA has shifted away from attacking him to ignoring him. Evidence of this, according to Abdenour, is the absence of press coverage on his recently published book. Abdenour believes the media are operating on instructions.

DAUGHTON